sets that the Georgians were not afraid of them. Yet, to be on the safe side, the officer intended to deploy his force in such a way as to keep the chieftains guessing how strong we were: he would put two horsemen at the scene of the meeting; two, half a mile away, on the edge of the meadow; and the rest along the highway, at intervals of a half mile between the posts. I told him that even Napoleon could not have thought up a better disposition of troops.

The old church, built of rough stone, was on a knoll half a mile from the road, under a solitary old oak. The meadow sloped smoothly from rugged rocks at the north down to a thick forest. We arrived a little ahead of time. Two or three men were sunning themselves in front of the locked door of the church, their horses tied to the rings in its walls. They did not look in our direction. Then horsemen began to arrive, singly or in small groups, from all points of the horizon, all in native garb, heavily armed, on beautiful horses. They dismounted before the church, greeted us with dignity, tied their horses to the tree or the rings, and sat down cross-legged on the ground not far from us. More and more horsemen appeared on the meadow. Some of the old men came with a youth or two who took care of their horses and stood behind them when they sat down on the ground. The Georgian delegation, a dozen civilians, looked humble in comparison with the elders of the Ossetian nation.

When all were assembled, one of the old men made a sign and the assembly came to order. The elders formed a broad circle, sitting cross-legged, each holding his gun in his lap; the younger men stood around, leaning on their rifles. About one fourth of the circle was left open for the Georgian delegation. The old church and the lonely oak with the horses tied to its hanging branches formed an impressive background.

Then the same old man opened the discussion. He spoke slowly, without expression on the deeply tanned face almost hidden behind a full beard that began just below his eyes and descended to the hilt of his dagger. His speech sounded like the bubbling of a stream. A Georgian who sat at my side whispered a translation.

"They welcome us. . . . This is the land of their forefathers . . . since creation of the earth. . . . Georgians and Russians came later . . . took their land . . . built cities and roads. . . . They wish no part in the new things. . . . We have closed the highway. . . . The Russians have desecrated the mosques. . . . They rely on God and the valor of their sons. . . . They love us . . . wish to listen to us. . . ."

Tseretelli followed this speech through an interpreter, then replied in Georgian. Unaccustomed to speaking cross-legged, he stood up but talked in the same monotonous vein as the old man. His speech was